

Dancing with my Dad

By Sue Black



For the longest time, I never thought my dad was special. I knew he was different from the other dads. They wore suits and went to jobs from 9 to 5. My dad worked nights, weekends, and holidays. He

wasn't around for chorus concerts, parent-teacher conferences, TV watching, or sometimes even Christmas Eve. He left for work before supper, just as my six brothers and sisters and I were sitting down to eat. He'd be in a hurry to get to work and wouldn't have time to stop and talk. About the time we were rushing out the door for school, my dad would be coming home from work. Too tired to talk, he'd go right to bed.

He'd been born a farmer. So I knew my dad was happy to work at the minimum security prison farm right outside of town. But all of those things made him different. I wanted my dad to be special.

He wore the same clothes everyday. It was like a uniform that he chose to wear. Navy blue pants, navy blue long-sleeved shirt, white socks, and black work boots. It never varied.

My dad owned two matching sets; one to wear, one for my mom to wash.

The only way I could see that my dad acknowledged the change in Wisconsin seasons was by the white t-shirt he wore underneath the long sleeve navy blue shirt.

There are only two seasons in Wisconsin. One is cold; winter; it lasts approximately 11 months out of the year. The other is warm, almost hot; summer; the month of August. By August it would be just warm enough for my dad to remove the white t-shirt underneath the long-sleeve navy blue shirt.

No short sleeves for my dad, no sleeves rolled up part way, no shorts, no polo shirts, no tennis shoes. Nope. Navy blue pants, navy blue shirt, white socks, black work boots – always. My dad was ready for everything dressed like that: work, church, mowing the lawn, re-roofing the house, fixing a leak in the bathroom, fishing, planting the garden, and hunting.

The way I looked at my dad changed in an instant one Saturday night. I had just run down the stairs and into the kitchen. I stopped. I stared. My dad stood next to the sink. He had changed his shirt. That's what all of the fussing had been about earlier in the evening. My mom had been insisting he wear a white long-sleeve shirt and a tie. Now he was still wearing the navy blue pants, white socks, and black work boots, but my mom had won the battle. Wearing that white shirt and tie, my dad was dressed up. We were going to the polka dance at The Red Barn just outside of town. I don't remember why it was important for him to look nice for that particular Saturday night dance. But I remember the rest.

It was then that my dad, the man with very little to say any other day of the week, taught me everything I would ever need to know for the rest of my life. And of course he did it without saying a word.

The gravel parking lot was full when we arrived at the dance hall. We had to park in the grass near the road. As we walked toward the Red Barn the light and the laughter coming from inside spilled out into the parking lot whenever anyone opened the door to the hall. The night air carried the scent of spilled beer and sweat, cigarettes and cigars. When we stepped inside, the room was crowded and hot.

The three-man polka band was at the far end of the room. It looked impossible, but they were able to play the seven instruments they had brought along, all at the same time. The accordion and drums, banjo, fiddle, harmonica, and trumpet were all making music. Every now and again the banjo player with the cymbals tied to his knees with a red bandana would slap his knees together and add to the melody.

I looked up at my dad.

He was smiling. He didn't look impatient or aggravated or too tired. His head was tilted to the side as he listened to the music. My mom had walked into his open arms and they were moving around the wooden dance floor as though they were walking on water. They were smooth; they moved as one, they took my breath away. The worry was gone from their faces. It was

the first time I had ever seen them look like a couple in love. They turned to smile and laugh with others as they danced round and round the floor.

He was tireless; he never stopped to rest. As the band paused between numbers my dad would continue to move his feet as if dancing, just slower. He danced my mom over to a bar stool to rest, and then he danced over to the quarter barrel of beer and poured her a fresh one. As my dad polkaed with that beer back to my mom, he looked for someone else who would dance with him while she sat the next one out. That's when I noticed the groups of ladies standing along the edges of the dance floor, talking and watching my mom and dad

dance. They had been waiting for that moment when he would smile, stretch out his hands as if to say "Are you ready?" and away they'd go.

I don't know why, but that night as my dad looked around the room his eyes found mine. Suddenly, he was smiling at me, motioning for me to come into his arms. It was my turn to learn to dance.

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Instead, he band sang. "Roll out the barrel. We'll have a barrel of fun. Roll out the barrel. We've got the blues on the run. Zing, boom terrara. Sing out a song of good cheer. Now's the time to roll the barrel, for the gang's all here."

Dancing around the room with my dad, listening to that polka, I learned if you're going to be happy, you've got to make it happen. You'll get as much out of life as you put into it. When you roll out a barrel, then you'll have a barrel of fun. It's easy enough to feel sorry for yourself; you've got to chase the blues away. You've got to sing out loud with your friends. And so we did.

"In heaven there is no beer. That's why we drink it here. And when we're gone from here, our friends will be drinking all the beer."

Being raised Catholic, I knew all about heaven. The nuns had never mentioned

specifically that there was no beer in heaven, but I wasn't surprised to hear it. As my dad turned me around the dance floor, humming along with the song, I learned the blessings of today were not guaranteed to last forever. The people I loved might one day be gone and the rest of us would have to carry on. And we would be expected to carry on with joy. So drink, dance, enjoy, be merry – you certainly can't take it with you.

When the band started to play a new polka, my dad would tilt his head to one side and get this faraway look in his eyes. He paused long enough to catch the underlying rhythm and beat before he started to move. There were things to hear besides the words, and my dad was listening to them. I was a pretty headstrong kid, I liked things my way, and the nuns had told my parents I was a natural leader. That night my dad taught me how to be a real leader. All it took was just a gentle touch on the small of my back, and he could get me to follow him anywhere. Sometimes other couples on the dance floor were not watching where they were going. My dad just stretched out his hand to let them know we were there. That way none of us would mis-step. We just had to learn to respect one another's space and we'd get along just fine. There was room for all of us to dance.

Between one of those dances, my dad reached down into the pocket of his shirt. He took out a navy blue bandana, placed it in the palm of his hand and began to slowly unfold the corners. Inside he had what looked like a mound of sawdust. It was floor wax. My dad danced around the floor a couple of times by himself and sprinkled the wax on the floor to make it easier to dance. He knew, sometimes you've got to lay the right groundwork if you want things to go smoothly.

And what about all of those ladies who had been watching my dad dance, waiting for their turn? None of them went home disappointed. My dad found time to dance with them all.

The band sang: *"Oh I don't want her you can have her she's too fat for me, she's too fat for me, she's too fat for me. Oh I don't want her you can have her she's too fat for me. She's too fat, she's too fat, she's too fat for me."*

I looked around the room for my mom and dad. My mom was a heavy woman.

The band was singing about her. Were her feelings hurt? Was my dad embarrassed? No. I found them – together – in the middle of the dance floor. They had their heads thrown back and they laughed out loud. My dad saw the beauty in my mom's soul when he looked into her eyes, and that beauty was all he saw no matter what size she was.

Up until that point I'd been shy and didn't want to dance with anyone except my dad. I had tried, but some of the men who had asked were so old – maybe 30 or 40. Some were not particularly handsome; sometimes their palms were sweaty or their stomachs hung way over their belt buckles. And none of them danced as well as my dad. I had started turning them all down. As the band sang again, *"Oh I don't want her you can have her she's too fat for me"*, another man approached me as I watched from my spot near the wall. I looked into his eyes and searched for the beauty my dad had just told me I'd find there, and when he asked me to dance, I said yes. Everybody deserves to dance.

Every now and then life, just like the dance, can start to move too fast and spin out of control. That's when my dad went up to the accordion player and requested the Blue Skirt Waltz. He knew it was time to slow things down, hold the ones you love real close, and tell them that you love them.

"I dream of that night with you, lady when first we met."

We danced in a world of blue how can my heart forget?

Blue were the skies, and blue were your eyes, just like the blue skirt you wore. I was in heaven that night, dancing the waltz with you."

I was in heaven that night, dancing with my dad. It's been a lot of years since he first taught me how to dance, but I've used the lessons I learned in his arms ever since.

My dad's getting older. One of the last times I was in Wisconsin was shortly after his second heart attack. Every time he got up out of his chair and moved across the room he walked so slowly and he looked fragile. It was sad to watch. As we were getting ready to leave, he got out of his chair and shuffled across the room to take my daughter in his arms and say good-bye. Suddenly, he remembered he hadn't yet taught her to dance. "Hey, it's Satur-



Sue dancing with her dad at her wedding.

day night, you know. Let's all go to the Red Barn and dance." he said. Then he put one hand in my daughter's and the other at the small of her back. He tilted his head to one side and I could tell he was catching the beat before he started. Then he hummed a polka and swayed back and forth. When the song ended he looked at all of us with a smile and said, "There, we danced and I didn't even move my feet."

Even up to the last dance, my dad is still teaching me. You're never too old to dance.

I know my dad won't be around forever and I could feel sad about that. But I've decided I won't. You see, I know there's a polka band warming up in heaven. My dad taught me that when the band starts to warm up, you go ahead and get excited because that means the dance is about to begin. I know there's a long line of lady angels standing off to the side watching out for my dad, waiting for him to get to heaven. They want to dance with him. After all, he is special you know. ➔

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